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ABSTRACT

After providing introductory material on the characteristics of effective information dissemination, this report describes the strategy used by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) to disseminate its publication "Information Abstracts" to members of the consortium. The role of the campus contact person in coordinating the flow of information services and inservice activities is discussed prior to the presentation of a list of tasks typically performed by this individual. The remainder of the report presents the results of a survey of the campus contact persons at 128 institutions conducted to identify strategies used by the respondents in distributing "Information Abstracts" and to assess dissemination problems and reader interest. Major findings, based on a 68% response rate, revealed four common distribution methods: (1) blanket distribution to all faculty members; (2) distribution to those faculty members indicating a desire to subscribe; (3) "top-down" distribution to department chairpersons; and (4) distribution to faculty members of only those abstracts on topics in their individual areas of interest. The most frequently mentioned distribution problem was the lack of enough copies. Several respondents encountered difficulties in systematizing distributional logistics. The most popular abstracts covered classroom strategies. (JP)

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Innovation Abstracts

National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development
North American Consortium

DISTRIBUTING INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Part II of a Series on Concerns Based Consulting

Written by: Karen Watkins
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Distributing Innovation Abstracts

Introduction

Over a year ago, the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development introduced its newest publication, Innovation Abstracts. With its introduction, we set in motion a unique distribution practice to permit widespread sharing. We gave each college in the consortium 50 copies of each Abstract to be distributed on whatever basis the person designated as our contact determined and sought to encourage campuses to select a distribution routine that would meet local needs. We have been delighted at both the success of this practice and the inventiveness of many of our contact persons. In order to both share some of the many effective practices that have been developed and to stimulate ideas for alternative practices, we've conducted a survey of our current consortium contact persons. As we share the findings from our survey, we also want to pause a moment to reflect on the characteristics of effective dissemination. Our practices have been designed around these characteristics--especially our reliance on you, our contact persons at member colleges, to provide a personal touch to bring our publications alive.

Characteristics of Effective Dissemination

Not until recent years have educators and change researchers begun to study the relationship between how an idea is transmitted and the likelihood the recipient will make use of it. However, a number of recent studies have identified some key ideas that can guide us in planning for effective dissemination. When your purpose is to create awareness of an idea or practice (this is our Innovation Abstracts' Stage of Concern code #0, Awareness)--

- Materials must be concise, attractive, and provide an overview.
- Materials should be distributed widely, though tailored to a particular audience.
- Materials by themselves are not enough; there must be some kind of personal follow-up.

° Materials should be designed to allow adaptation of the idea or practice by the intended new user.

When your purpose is to provide materials for those who are ready to use a new idea or practice (this is our Innovation Abstracts' Stage of Concern code #1, Information)--

° Material must be practical and usable, with the first steps for use clearly defined.

° Ongoing, on-campus support from administrators, staff developers, and/or colleagues is essential--especially for first use.

John Emrick, who is noted for his research on dissemination practice, distinguishes among three different types of materials relating to an innovation: (1) descriptive--a general description; (2) informative--"how to" instructions; (3) supportive--information which assists people in refining practices already in use. Perhaps the heart of research on dissemination is the finding that there is no substitute for personal interaction for increasing the spread of new ideas.

NISOD's Dissemination Strategy

By now, you may have noted that almost all of our Abstracts are at the awareness or information levels. In targeting them in this way, we hope to gain widespread awareness of new ideas and practices using a brief, readable format. We find that this enables us to build a community of readers who have at least a general understanding of these new ideas so that follow-up activities geared to individual campus needs can be generated. It has always been central to our thinking that you, our campus contact person, will want to use the Abstracts to enhance your work in staff development. We have envisioned that you will provide the essential ingredient of personal interaction with your colleagues.

In this hope, we have not been disappointed. Indeed, we find that you are using the Abstracts in campus workshops, as a stimulus for discussion in chairpersons' meetings, as a conversation topic in the staff lounge, as an introduction to ideas further developed in our Creative Teaching Series modules or other materials in your staff development library, or as part of a faculty professional development plan. Similarly, many of you reported sharing the Abstracts with colleagues on other campuses or at conferences. This, too, is an important part of making the distribution of the Abstracts more personal. Finally, when you or another staff member recognizes the author, college, or program or contacts them to get acquainted, we like to think that the important networking that occurs is a direct outcome of your personal involvement in dissemination.

Background of Our Dissemination History

From the beginning we built the mechanism for effective dissemination because we asked our contact persons to distribute the Abstracts. Throughout NISOD's brief two-year history, the role of our contact person has become increasingly important to the life of the network itself. We want to share with you a capsule history of the role of a campus contact person for the North American Consortium because a number of you have just recently assumed this responsibility.

A little more than two years ago, with the help of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education, we began working cooperatively with a group of 52 community colleges in North America to affect the growth of professional development programs on those campuses. The concept was an ambitious one--using the research and experience gained in the Program in Community College Education here at the University of Texas, we wanted to offer training for professionals in higher education through in-service activities and carefully targeted publication services.

It seemed more logical for our professional staff to travel than for our colleges to visit us, if we gathered with the frequency we intended. We decided to mail materials to member schools on a regular basis and to travel to them for consulting and training as we engaged in this cooperative effort to improve the teaching/learning climate. But if the plan were to work, careful groundwork needed to be laid to justify the efforts both of our host colleges and our staff. In other words, from the outset we stressed that what we were undertaking was a partnership. To encourage this mutuality two crucial components were included as part of the consortium.

1. The chief executive officer was asked to strongly endorse the program and lend support by attending an initial planning meeting and by participating in the subsequent planning of in-service activities at his/her institution.
2. A professional on the campus was to contribute one-third of his/her time to coordinate the flow of information services and the planning of in-service activities.

The person serving this staff development function became our contact person on the campus and our lifeline to the college. Descriptions of these contact persons varied greatly--some were teaching faculty who had been given release time to work with our staff; some were administrators involved in the management of instruction; in a few cases, the president wanted to be the contact person. Some of our contacts were experienced in staff development; others had no previous experience in planning such activities. But as a whole, more than any other component of our program, this group provided the structure and support necessary for our sharing network to have stability.

Perhaps a list of typical tasks performed by the contact would help to give a better view of how this coalescing occurred.

1. Coordinator of a planning and orientation visit. This item deserves special comment, because it set the tone for much of our future work. For a day or

two, a member of our staff who was to coordinate work in that geographic region visited the college and got acquainted with a particular college--its personality, needs, and dreams. Our contact structured this visit, coordinated meetings, interviews, planning sessions and, of course, spent a great deal of time with our staff member. What we learned about each other's organizations as this partnership formed became the foundation of our work together. Inevitably, those bonds strengthened during the next two years and today continue to nourish our efforts.

2. Development and supervision of a plan for distribution of our publications. Initially, this included only Linkages and the Creative Teaching Series modules. However, a year ago Innovation Abstacts became a publication feature and needed weekly distribution. Devising a system for effective distribution of these publications was not an easy task for the contact person but had the potential to build a broad base of support for staff development at an institution. The number of participants in a workshop is invariably limited, but the newsletter and Abstracts can be distributed throughout a campus. Faculty who are never reached by other faculty development activities could be informed through these publications.
3. Planning and hosting on-campus workshops. The tasks here were considerable but generally occurred only two or three times during a year. They included: making transportation and hotel arrangements for workshop leaders; arranging for room, equipment, and supplies (including duplication and distribution of workshop packets); recruiting and providing for the needs of workshop attenders; distributing and collecting of pre- and post-assessment instruments; calling and/or writing to remind participants of time, place, etc.; securing funds for the workshop or conference; providing participant list (directory), snacks, and often a place to relax or dine after a session; thanking all who

helped (librarians, A/V, cafeteria, clerical) in person and/or in writing; handling incidental paperwork and follow-up work, including expense reimbursement; and monitoring follow-up staff development activities.

4. Telephone consultation contact with our staff liaison. This became a useful and regular way to dialogue with contact persons. We found there were so many ways to help each other and such a consistant need for current information that this telephone contact became a renewing process. This dialogue kept us apprised of events affecting institutional life and consequently showed us how our materials, workshops, and consultation could be more relevant.

It is our hope that we can maintain regular contact with you, help you when we can appropriately do so, and offer you better access to our network--to the North American Consortium as a whole and to our staff in particular. Perhaps the findings of our survey of your distribution practices will also help you plan future staff development activities.

Reporting Our Findings

Over the summer, we asked our contact persons at each campus in the consortium to help us evaluate the effectiveness of our current distribution practices. Despite summer schedules, 87 of you (68%) responded in time for inclusion in this report. What follows is a distillation of your comments with a number of ideas for distributing Innovation Abstracts.

Strategies for Distributing the Abstracts

Four types of strategies for distributing Innovation Abstracts were used most frequently by the contact persons responding to our survey.

1. Blanket Distribution - By far the most popular strategy is to mail the

Abstracts regularly to all faculty each week. This approach enables our contact persons to develop a consistent readership and permits all faculty and administrators to decide for themselves if the topic of the Abstract is of interest.

2. The "Subscriber" Approach - Again, using the notion of building an Abstracts community, this approach to distributing the Abstracts seems especially useful to our contacts on the larger campuses in our network. It may begin with a letter from our contact. This letter describes the Abstracts to the faculty and may even offer a sample. Then faculty return a coupon if they want to receive the Abstracts regularly. Frequently, a list of who will receive the Abstracts each week is developed in terms of those people who are influential ("opinion leaders"), most likely to adopt new practices ("early adopters"), and/or most likely to share the ideas ("high communicators"). In a large community college setting, these are effective strategies.
3. "Top-down" Distribution - Another distribution strategy used by several is a branching out design, working down from the top administration to the faculty. Contact persons using this strategy have all administrators automatically on the mailing list (as did almost all of our respondents) and send several copies of each Abstract to each department or division chairperson for them to distribute as they see fit. This approach works best when department chairs have acknowledged responsibility for staff development because it assumes that they are the most likely to know the interests of faculty in their departments.
4. "Targeted" Distribution - Some of our contact persons have established a more specialized system for distributing the Abstracts. Sometimes using personal judgment as to faculty receptivity to particular topics, they may distribute each Abstract to a different group. Perhaps the most unique version of this

approach is that developed by Jim Pollard of Spokane Community College. Jim took our coding system seriously and came to Austin to find out more about it. After learning more about Stages of Concern (see Part I of this series) and about the competencies which undergird the different notebook categories, he went back to Spokane and involved faculty in a process which led them to identify their concerns in each notebook category and indicate one area of special interest for the coming year as part of a professional development plan. Modules and Abstracts in the appropriate category are automatically sent to the faculty members throughout the year, with the computer generating mailing labels each week, based on the Abstract and notebook code. To further personalize this effort, he is conducting mini-workshops in each notebook category (e.g. Assessing Students, Planning Instruction, etc.) to give faculty further opportunity to share their thinking and to react to Abstract ideas. Naturally, this has meant that faculty needed to have their own notebooks, too.

Like Jim, several others shared approaches to using or distributing the Abstracts. Some examples follow:

- At the beginning of the year, each faculty member was sent an orange Abstract binder in which to keep weekly issues, along with a letter describing the Abstracts.

  Pat Sheer, Phoenix College

- Additional NISOD notebooks were purchased to keep in Division offices. A master mailing list was set up with names in three columns, four spaces apart. This is xeroxed and the copy is cut apart for individual names. Each name is stapled to the top of the Abstract, and the stack is then brought to the mailroom. It takes the secretary about 20 minutes to prepare for distribution.

  Ellen Korn, Jefferson Community College

- We have two computerized lists--one of persons receiving personal copies, one of persons who have expressed a desire to be on a department routing list.

Marc Glucksman, El Camino College

Distribution Problems

This is an area of particular interest to us, since the effectiveness of our service is heavily dependent on successful distribution. Establishing a system for handling the logistics of getting them out is difficult. It came as no surprise then when several people said their major problem was keeping up with distribution. We would like to help. It may be useful for you to know that colleges which report no problems with distribution do one or more the following:

- Have mailing labels prepared in advance;
- Have student or secretarial assistance in getting them out;
- Have a pre-determined mailing list which can be left with a secretary or with the mailroom.

Common to all of these approaches is the fact that the responsibility for distributing the Abstracts is clear and the procedures are fairly systematic and routine.

Happily, the other most frequently cited problem in distributing the Abstracts is that you do not receive enough of them. Hurray! Bulk rates are available for those of you who want to receive more each week, though we must charge extra to cover our skyrocketing printing and mailing costs. We welcome such requests. (Consortium members may receive 50 extra copies per week for $50.00 a year.)

Reader Interest

We suspect a problem which affects distribution is reader reaction to Abstract topics. To date, we have been overwhelmed by the positive reception to the Abstracts (83% in our survey rated them positively, 17% no comment, and 0 rated them negatively!)

Future plans include an emphasis on teacher effectiveness research, "thinkpieces" on community college teaching, etc.

The types of Abstracts preferred by our readers ranked as follows:

__1__ Classroom Strategies

__2__ Descriptions of New Programs

__3__ Results of Research on Teaching

__4__ Discussions of Issues

Recommended Changes Include:

In Content:

"Keep as practical as possible."

"Quality and relevance varies; some are too elementary, some not for our particular faculty."

"More aids to teachers and less public relations."

In Distribution:

"Be more specific as to which groups would receive best impact."

Encouraging Comments Include:

"We like the one-page format--teaching strategy and learning theory have been interesting."

"It really is a very nice newsletter. The fact that we, along with other institutions have varying needs means that some topics are of more interest than others."

"The Abstracts have been well received by faculty and administrators. They add a dimension of new and current data to our staff development program."

"The Abstracts are excellent. They should whet the appetite for further reading in particular areas of teaching and learning."

A Profile of Our Disseminators

Of the 67% of our respondents who indicated their organizational positions, 46% held administrative or related positions such as Title III Coordinator.

Another 45% were staff development specialists (full or part-time). Seven percent listed themselves as a full-time faculty.

Thirty percent of the institutions included in our survey have less than 150 staff members. Another 31% have from 151 to 370 faculty and staff, while 15% have from 371 to 1200. (Twenty-four percent did not report staff size.) This profile suggests that our consortium schools are a fairly typical cross-section of community colleges nationally.

Size of Impact

We asked how many staff were actually receiving the Abstracts each week, since many colleges duplicate additional copies for all staff. In fact, we found that 24% of our colleges distribute the Abstracts to 100% of the their full time staff. Another 27% distribute to 40-99% of their full time staff. Though an actual figure was impossible to determine (many colleges route Abstracts; others distribute to part-time faculty; others use them as workshop handouts; others publish selected issues in a professional development newsletter), a conservative estimate based on actual figures reported in the survey puts our readership each week at approximately 15,000. Even more exciting is the news that a large number of these institutions have doubled the number of their weekly readers since we conducted our survey.

Our response might be likened to Mark Twain's comment when they finished the cables that connected Maine to California by telegraph. Upon viewing the accomplishment he wondered aloud, "But will Maine have anything to say to California?" That so many college staff are receiving our Abstracts is both gratifying news and an awesome responsibility. We hope you and your colleagues will continue to share your feedback so that we can ensure current, high quality reading.

Summary

We also come to you with the expressed wish for continued successful collaboration. It is our hope that the materials provided to you through our Consortium can offer an effective extension of your college's current staff development practices, at less than the cost of one on-campus workshop. In addition, we like to think the Abstracts are giving new and long-deserved visibility to our teaching institutions in higher education and are clearly and briefly describing exemplary programs and strategies that those institutions have developed.

In one particular way, we need your immediate help to find potential Abstracts that deal with practical teaching strategies. These are our most popular issues but are difficult for us to include in the series because they are the least frequently submissions. We suspect that few teachers write for our series because they are very busy professionals. But we need to include their practical expertise in the Abstracts. As our campus contact, you may once again be able to help us, to encourage particular teachers working in the classroom to submit an Abstract, to organize a team of writers when appropriate, to provide support help for typing or editing when possible, to act as reporter and write an observer's account of a classroom practice at work, etc. Hopefully, if you think of our 15,000 readers, you will find added inducement to share one success at work at your institution. We are attaching to the end of this module ten copies of our guidelines for writing an Abstract for you to use as you see fit.

We want the Abstracts to be useful to you and to our faculty readers. We think they will be helpful if they generate discussion among faculty (even if faculty disagree with the Abstract author) and do not unduly overburden you or undercut the primacy of your staff development efforts. As always, we invite your feedback on how well we're meeting our goals.

We also hope to remain free to evolve as you do--to remain flexible in terms of our format and distribution practices so that we can quickly convert to "a better idea" when appropriate. Finally, we hope you will share in our excitement at the growing cadre of campus contact persons who are creatively inventing fresh approaches to disseminating new ideas and forming the arteries of a growing national consortium dedicated to the improvement of instruction. Consistent with research findings, your efforts illustrate that the personal touch works, that materials alone do not create change. Together, we can.

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